

'Matriarch of NAACP' dies at 102

First female national president helped orchestrate Baltimore move

BY NICOLE FULLER AND KELLY BREWINGTON
[SUN REPORTERS]

Enolia P. McMillan, the first female president of the national NAACP and an educator whose career spanned 42 years, died of natural causes yesterday at her home in Stevenson. She was 102.

Mrs. McMillan, whose father was born a slave, became a teacher in 1927 and quickly became a crusader for equal pay for black teachers and better schools for black students. In 1935, she helped to reactivate the city chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and remained an active force in it for more than fifty years. She played a key role in persuading the NAACP to move its national headquarters from New York to Baltimore in 1986.

Kweisi Mfume, former president and CEO of the national NAACP and a close friend of the McMillan family, called Mrs. McMillan a "pillar of the civil rights movement."

"She was very much the matriarch of the NAACP," he said. "She was a fighter who was relentless in pursuing justice." [Please see MCMILLAN, 9A]



Enolia P. McMillan was a crusader for equal pay for black teachers and better schools for black students.

[SUN FILE PHOTO 1985]

FROM THE COVER

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tice."

Mr. Mfume credited Mrs. McMillan and former NAACP Executive Director Benjamin L. Hooks with orchestrating the NAACP's move from New York to Northwest Baltimore. While Mr. Hooks and others helped craft a financial package to initiate the move, it was Mrs. McMillan whose on-the-ground efforts made it a reality, Mr. Mfume said.

"It was Mrs. McMillan who went out and sold pies and sold commemorative bricks and held raffles and cajoled the members of that board to think about finally owning a building of their own," he said.

The eldest of four children, she was born Oct. 20, 1904, in Willow Grove, Pa., to John Pettigen, who was born a slave in Virginia, and Elizabeth Fortune Pettigen, a domestic worker.

The family moved to Charles County and when she was about 8, settled in Baltimore. The family attended the Calvary Baptist Church on Garrison Boulevard in West Baltimore, where she, her mother and sister were active in the church's community programs.

In 1922, she graduated from Douglass High School in Baltimore.

She wanted to be a doctor — a pediatrician because she liked children — but heeding to the realities of a black woman's opportunity in that day, decided to become a teacher, said her eldest granddaughter, Tiffany Beth McMillan.

She spent five hours a day commuting from Baltimore to Washington by train to attend Howard University, where she received a bachelor's degree in education in 1927 and began her first teaching job at Denton High School in Caroline County. In 1928, she became a principal in Charles County.

In 1933, she earned a master's degree from Columbia University and returned to Baltimore to teach. The same year she played a key role in reactivating the city chapter of the NAACP.

Mrs. McMillan's master's thesis at Columbia was titled "The Fac-



National NAACP President Enolia P. McMillan and the Rev. John Wright begin their journey to Ocean City's Boardwalk in 1986 to demonstrate against businesses' hiring practices.

KARL MERTON FERRON [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

tors Affecting Secondary Education for Negroes in Maryland Counties."

Her experience in the schools put her in direct contact with the pernicious effects of segregation. When she worked in Charles County there was only one secondary institution for blacks while there were five high schools for whites even though the population of blacks and whites were about the same, she recalled in a 1986 interview in *The Sun*.

The situation was even more unequal because it was difficult for black students to get to their school's remote location.

"So we got together and bought a little used yellow school bus and named it Amos," she said. "It gave us fits but it also got out to students for almost 40 miles around. The next year we bought a second bus and by the third year, we were up to having a brand-new bus. By the time I left, we had three buses."

On Dec. 26, 1935, she married Betha D. McMillan. They had a

son, Betha D. McMillan Jr., in 1970. Her husband died of cancer in 1984 at 76.

Her role as a mother and wife — in which she hosted lavish holiday dinners complete with roasted turkey and sweet potatoes topped with marshmallows and ironed and cleaned as most women in her day — didn't slow her activism.

"She was a very independent woman and a feminist and a fore-runner in terms of civil rights, said Tiffany Beth McMillan. "But she was so old fashioned when it came to home making ... cooking, and ironing and cleaning."

In 1969, Mrs. McMillan was elected president of the Baltimore chapter of the NAACP after she defeated Juanita J. Mitchell, who sought the post after her mother, Lillie M. Jackson, decided to step down after holding the post for 34 years. Mrs. Mitchell's husband, Clarence Mitchell Jr., was director of the NAACP's Washington bureau and the group's Capitol Hill lobbyist.

Mrs. McMillan's victory was considered an upset because of the Mitchell-Jackson family's long grip on the local civil rights group. Mrs. McMillan, who was 65, when she assumed the post, said he wanted to reach out to young "black militants" who felt out of the organization's work, according to an article that appeared in *The Evening Sun*. "I've been a militant all of my life," Mrs. McMillan said in the article, "but I am not extreme."

In addition to leading the Baltimore branch and the Maryland state conference of the NAACP, Mrs. McMillan held the title of NAACP national president for many years. The role at the time was largely ceremonial, but Mrs. McMillan wielded a considerable influence over national NAACP policy and its daily operations.

A diligent fundraiser, Mrs. McMillan baked peach pies and sold \$1 lapel pins so the NAACP could move from New York to Baltimore.

The pins, which stated, "I gave"

TIMELINE

1927: Enolia Pettigen McMillan becomes a teacher in Caroline County after earning a degree at Howard University and in 1928 becomes principal of Pomonkey High School in Charles County.

1933: Earns a master's degree from Columbia University. Her thesis topic: "The Factors Affecting Secondary Education for Negroes in Maryland Counties." She uses the thesis to crusade for better pay and facilities for black teachers and students.

1935: Returns to Baltimore to teach in the city schools and helps to re-activate the city chapter of the NAACP.

1954: Becomes one of the first black teachers assigned to a formerly all-white school after school segregation is outlawed.

1969: Elected president of the Baltimore Chapter of the NAACP and holds the post for 15 years.

1984: Becomes first female president of the national NAACP

1986: NAACP moves its national headquarters from New York to Baltimore.

and "NAACP" were wildly popular and netted the organization \$150,000.

Every opportunity, she hawked the pins. Mrs. McMillan, a teacher and administrator in the city schools for 35 years, brought the same sense of activism to that job, successfully lobbying as a teachers union president against a law that allowed "colored" teachers to be paid less than white teachers.

Mrs. McMillan stayed active in civil rights well into her golden years. In 1985, she led a protest against South Africa's apartheid system in front of the country's embassy in Washington. In 1998, she joined NAACP leaders in Atlanta for the group's annual convention.

"She was an extremely effective force at the convention," said Mr. Mfume. "Everybody dropped everything just to say hello to her. No one thought she would make it there at her age, and when she did, no one expected her to be as spry as she was. She was still active, still holding meetings, still giving advice — solicited or unsolicited."

She drove until her late 80s, her granddaughter said, and attended church at Calvary until she was 96.

Mr. Mfume said he was with the family Friday when loved ones celebrated Mrs. McMillan's birthday. "We were just kind of happy about the fact that she made another year," he said.

On the block of 26th Street where the NAACP's Baltimore branch headquarters is located is a street sign reading "Enolia P. McMillan Way." The city headquarters was named after Mrs. McMillan in 2000.

Yesterday, NAACP Baltimore branch President Marvin "Doc" Cheatham, who referred to Mrs. McMillan as "Mrs. Mac," placed a framed photo of her above the archway of the building's main entrance as a reminder to members of her legacy.

"There has always been pictures of the presidents on the wall, but I just thought her photo belonged in the most important place in that building for everyone who left that building to remember Mrs. Mac," he said. "She was remarkably strong."

In addition to her son and granddaughter, both of Stevenson, Mrs. McMillan is survived by three other grandchildren, Angela McMillan Howell of Yeadon, Pa.; David Betha McMillan of Providence, R.I.; and Sally Camille McMillan, of Stevenson.

A viewing is scheduled for Sunday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the March Funeral Home West, 4300 Wabash Ave., Baltimore. Services are scheduled for 11 a.m. Monday at Calvary Baptist Church, 3911 Garrison Blvd., Baltimore.

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